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**'Are we to be contented with dreams?' Getting older in the work of Leonora Carrington**

**Abstract:**

In *The Hearing Trumpet* (1976), written by Leonora Carrington (1917-2011), a British-born surrealist writer and artist who fled to Mexico during WWII, an elderly grandmother is dispatched to an institute for senile old women, where she embarks on a fantastical journey with the other residents. Rather than the last stop before the final place of rest, the residential home, and by extension the narrative, become the site of adventure and opportunity, where the limitations of old age are cast off. In her writing and artwork, especially those completed in her later years, Carrington pursues her interest in ageing through the figure of the old woman. In this article I examine why Carrington found the ageing process to offer creative possibilities. I consider how ageing is also implicated in feminist re-readings of her novel and art, and why the old woman might make a new singular contribution to surrealist avant-garde expression.

**Keywords:**

Leonora Carrington, ageing, surrealism, feminism, old woman, crone, *The Hearing Trumpet*, art

**Bio:**

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Luis Buñuel's memoir, *Mi último suspiro* [*My Last Sigh*], begins with his mother, and his observations of her in later life:

Durante los diez últimos años de su vida, mi madre fue perdiendo poco a poco la memoria(. ...) Llegó a no reconocer ni a sus hijos, a no saber quiénes éramos ni quién era ella. Yo entraba, le daba un beso, me sentaba un rato a su lado —físicamente, mi madre gozaba de muy buena salud y hasta estaba bastante ágil para su edad—; luego salía y volvía a entrar. Ella me recibía con la misma sonrisa y me invitaba a sentarme como si me viera por primera vez y sin saber ni cómo me llamaba. (Buñuel 1982: 13)

[During the last ten years of her life, my mother gradually lost her memory(. ...) She was in perfect physical health and remarkably agile for her age, but in the end she no longer recognized her children. She didn't know who we were, or who she was. I'd walk into her room, kiss her, sit her awhile. Sometimes I'd leave, then turn around and walk back in again. She greeted me with the same smile and invited me to sit down – as if she were seeing me for the first time. She didn't remember my name. (Buñuel 2003: 3)]

The observations record his mother's ailing memory within a well body, and illustrate the loss felt by Buñuel at his mother's inability to recognise him. At the end of *Mi último suspiro* Buñuel examines his own ageing:

Hasta los setenta y cinco años no he detestado la vejez(. ...) Leía y releía *La vejez*, de Simone de Beauvoir, libro que me parece admirable. (Buñuel 1982: 247)

[Until I turned seventy-five, I found old age rather agreeable(. ...) I enjoyed playing at early senility, I loved reading Simone de Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse*.] (Buñuel 2003: 253)<sup>1</sup>

Buñuel finds repeated joy in Beauvoir's narrative on ageing.<sup>2</sup> Once past seventy-five however, Buñuel notes his own decline, and the joy of playing with and reading about ageing whilst on its peripheries is lost to the realities of increasing ill health:

Después, en los cinco últimos años, ha empezado verdaderamente la vejez. Me han asaltado diversas afecciones, sin gravedad extrema. He empezado a quejarme de las piernas, antaño tan fuertes, luego de los ojos e, incluso, de la cabeza (olvidos frecuentes, falta de coordinación)(. ...) Mi salud se ve rodeada de amenazas. Y soy consciente de mi decrepitud. (Buñuel 1982: 247)

[During the last five years, however, true old age has begun. Whole series of petty annoyances attack me; I've begun to complain about my legs, my eyes, my head, my lapses of memory, my weak coordination(. ...) The enemy is everywhere, and I'm painfully conscious of my decrepitude.] (Buñuel 2003: 253)

Here, in his later years, Buñuel finds himself old, like his mother before him, in a space where there are blanks instead of memories, 'olvidos frecuentes'. Beauvoir's text analyses the ageing process, and Buñuel's response here shows that ageing operates as a difference, and 'like the differences of social class, gender, sexuality, and race, functions to police or regulate social behavior by constructing boundaries, categories, and definitions' (Bazin and White

2006: iii). In this article, I will consider one writer and artist's response to the boundaries of age, and the questions of ageing, and specifically of women ageing: Leonora Carrington.

Leonora Carrington was a British-born writer and artist who fled to Mexico City during the Second World War, where she died in 2011. Her work bears the traces of surrealism to which she was attracted as a young woman, and in which she became heavily involved alongside her then partner, Max Ernst, one of the most influential surrealist painters. Carrington was a striking young woman, and for the surrealist men, brought to life the *femme-enfant*, or woman-child muse for whom they had been searching, embodying the coming together of the rational and the irrational. Carrington's own interests lay elsewhere however, and in 2017, the centenary of her birth, her legacy is being examined anew. A volume of articles reconsidering Carrington's place in and significance for the international avant-garde has been published (Eburne and McAra (eds) 2017), alongside reissues of Carrington's literary work (Carrington 2017a, 2017b). Symposia discussing Carrington's art and literary work, as well as a theatre adaptation of her novel *The Hearing Trumpet* have also taken place.<sup>3</sup> Much of this material counters the observation made by the writer Ali Smith in her introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Hearing Trumpet* (2005),<sup>4</sup> 'People who write about Leonora Carrington (and far too little has been written about her extraordinary art and writings) tend to dwell on the life' (Smith 2005: v). Carrington had a fascinating life, and it is the subject of biographies, both familial (Moorhead 2017) and fictive (Poniatowska 2015). Her life has influenced analyses of her work, and shaped our understanding of her artistic process. However, the confusion of artistic practice and personal biography has also been a long-standing feature of criticism of women artists and writers, and Carrington is no exception to this, as I discuss elsewhere (Kent 2017).

In this article, I will focus primarily on Carrington's novel *The Hearing Trumpet* (2005). I will examine Carrington's reimagining of women's old age in the novel, arguably its focal point. Following Marina Warner, who states that Carrington's 'words (...) provide an important key to understanding all her work; they give access to her imagination, her memory palace of wide reading, looking, and thinking, and help the viewer of her visual imagery to find a way through its many chambers' (1991: 12), I will consider the continued importance of the figure of the elderly woman across Carrington's wider artistic practice. *The Hearing Trumpet* was published in the late seventies at a time of feminist re-examining of artistic practice more generally, and re-read by feminist critics in the 1990s who showed increasing interest in the work of Leonora Carrington and other women artists and writers associated with surrealism more specifically. The critical reception of Carrington's engagement with women's old age in her literary and artistic work creates a point of contact between Carrington's work and broader feminist debates on ageing. Natalya Lusty (2007) observes *The Hearing Trumpet* 'producing in the texture of its narrative a strange hybrid of feminist and Surrealist ideological positions', as Carrington replaces 'the figure of the *femme-enfant* with a plethora of geriatric and monstrous heroines' (Lusty 2007: 78). In the same volume as Jonathan P. Eburne (2017) and Catriona McAra's (2017) chapters which feature extended discussion of *The Hearing Trumpet*, Anna Watz (2017) considers the contribution made to poststructuralist feminism by Carrington's earlier novel, *The Stone Door*, making comparisons between the two novels, and concluding that *The Stone Door* 'deserves to be reconsidered as one of the most important visions and revisions of gender and sexuality of the surrealist movement' (Watz 2017: 102). What interests me about *The Hearing Trumpet* and its contribution to feminist debates on women's ageing is its attempt at 'demassification' (Kristeva 1986: 209). As Buñuel's observations at the start of this article show, ageing is a universal phenomenon that cuts across other boundaries of difference, and yet the individual

experience of ageing, especially as written in *The Hearing Trumpet*, is entirely singular within those same boundaries of difference.

The heroine and narrator of *The Hearing Trumpet* is Marian Leatherby, a 92-year-old woman, mother, and grandmother. She is deaf, has no teeth, a short grey beard, and lives with her son, daughter-in-law, and youngest grandson in their house in Mexico City. She spends her days in the backyard of the house with her two cats, a hen, a maid and her two children, some flies, and a cactus plant. She dreams of the northern hemisphere, of her English homeland, and of Lapland, the destination of her dreams. Carrington captures the predicament of Marian's old age perfectly when she writes: 'I give no trouble at all and keep myself clean with no assistance from anybody' (Carrington 2005 [1977]: 4). Marian is the archetypal dependent elder whose domestic situation takes a familiar turn when, thanks to the hearing trumpet gifted to her by her friend Carmella, Marian overhears her family's plan to ship her off to a home for 'senile females' (HT 18). Aware that she has become a burden, and without the reserves to fight it, Marian prepares her things and is taken to the home by her family, accompanied by Carmella. Rather than this being the end of the story, Marian's life in the home run by the Well of Light Brotherhood marks the start of a series of unlikely events involving winking nuns, werewolves, and a new ice age. The unwritten fear here of the elderly of a descent towards death in the home does indeed occur, but the rebirth which follows heralds the start of a new life, as Marian steps back from old age into something more like eternal life. By the end of the novel, the world has literally turned on its axis, and the narrative finishes with the realization that Marian and her elderly companions are now living somewhere near Lapland. As Marian observes, 'If the old woman can't go to Lapland, then Lapland must come to the Old Woman' (HT 158).



Described as a novel, or a novella, the format of *The Hearing Trumpet* is difficult to pin down. It has no chapters or sections, contains letters, poetry, incantations, typographical variations, and almost thirty of the 158 pages are given over to another text, a nun's tractate *mise-en-abîme*. In her discussion of old women protagonists in short stories by contemporary French women writers, Jean Anderson observes that 'if we are to explore the full range of women's experiences through literature we must look to short stories because it is unusual to find old people as central characters in longer works of fiction, at least in the case of France' (Anderson 2007: 347). In *The Hearing Trumpet* the ambiguity of form and shorter length allows for a space in which it is possible for Carrington to construct a world shaped around a woman in extreme old age, and to imagine that world differently. Rather than being constrained by age, *The Hearing Trumpet* capitalizes on the freedom experienced by its nonagenarian female protagonist who no longer bears the beauty of youth and its siren call to suitors, who has passed through the all-consuming demands of motherhood, and is unwanted as a grandmother. In old age Marian has a freedom paradoxically created by no longer being needed, or being looked at, or being available to be looked at. Deafness is reconfigured in a similar way. The titular hearing trumpet highlights Marian's isolation from her family and their scheming, but to be apart from the noise of family life in Carrington's reworking of old age gives creative voice instead to Marian's 'inside story' (Anderson 2007: 359): her thoughts, memories, and dreams. The story is written in the style and the tradition of an oral account, and as readers we are invited to listen to Marian's singular voice and to the narrative of *The Hearing Trumpet*, as well as to read it.

The infirmity of old age to which Buñuel refers at the end of *Mi último suspiro* is, perhaps the main impediment to an artistic reimagining of (extreme) old age. In *The Hearing Trumpet*, infirmity is simply cooked away. Marian and her elderly companions are reborn towards the

end of the novel in a cauldron of hot broth. They remain old, but are vital. Marian recognises her face in an obsidian mirror, and claims that she ‘felt very well and refreshed after the hot broth, and somehow deeply relieved, just as I felt long ago after I had the last of my teeth out’ (HT 138-40). Marian changes from being a ‘drooling sack of decomposing flesh’ (HT 10) at the start of the narrative, to being ‘as spry as a mountain goat’ (HT 140) following her alchemical rebirth. A post-apocalyptic community of reborn old women and animals remaking the earth at the end of *The Hearing Trumpet*, into either a utopia or a dystopia depending on your perspective (Alderman 2017), has more in common with science fiction or perhaps speculative fiction, and *The Hearing Trumpet* borrows from different genres as well as different types of text, as we have seen. While *The Hearing Trumpet* contains historical references, both direct and oblique, to the Second World War, the vegetarianism adopted by this new community of elderly women, and their ecological concerns feel very modern. Of course, the idea of a community’s wellbeing being the concern of the elderly is also a part of traditional stories and societies. Orenstein (1990) observes how Carrington brings together the traditional and the modern in her artwork: ‘Carrington’s art is a modern woman’s codex for this awakening. It speaks of past ages, of cycles of matriarchy and patriarchy, and of lost continents that once possessed matristic cultures. Through a meditation upon her work, the viewer is induced into a new formulation of both reality and identity, of space, time, self, and cosmic history’ (Orenstein 1990: 60). I would argue that this new formulation, which brings together opposing concepts in Carrington’s work, both literary and artistic, as I will show shortly, finds its roots in surrealism, whose aim was to bring together the real and the imaginary in an enhanced reality.

Carrington makes explicit reference to surrealism in *The Hearing Trumpet*. Shortly before the nun's text is introduced, in a section in which Marian remembers her life and family in England, Carrington writes,

Art in London didn't seem quite modern enough and I began to want to study in Paris where the Surrealists were in full cry. Surrealism is no longer considered modern today and almost every village rectory and girl's school have surrealist pictures hanging on their walls. Even Buckingham Palace has a large reproduction of Magritte's famous slice of ham with an eye peering out. It hangs, I believe, in the throne room. Times do change indeed (*HT* 66).

This paragraph echoes the changes seen by Carrington in her lifetime up until the point of writing *The Hearing Trumpet*. At the point of its publication, the novel also functions as a meditation on the (living) legacy of surrealism, and perhaps an artist's meditation on her own relevance after an already long career. André Breton, the self-proclaimed leader of the French surrealists died in 1966, and questions had been raised before then about surrealism's relevance. In *Mi último suspiro* Buñuel (1982: 248) [2003: 254] refers to 1977-1978, when *The Hearing Trumpet* was published in English and two years after the French publication, as an 'año fatal' [fatal year] for the surrealist group when Man Ray, Alexander Calder, Max Ernst y Jacques Prévert all died.<sup>5</sup> Carrington would live on for another thirty-four years, working artistically into her last decade. Commenting on surrealism's adoption into the mainstream, Carrington reflects on the significance of longevity in art, and especially in surrealism, an avant-garde art and literary movement so focused on the concerns of youth: the new, the shocking, the iconoclastic. The reference to René Magritte's *The Portrait* (1935) in *The Hearing Trumpet* underlines Carrington's artistic link to the Belgian painter who also had

as a patron Edward James, the British poet, art collector and long-time patron of surrealist artists. The painting depicts a table set for dinner, with a bottle of wine, water glass, knife and fork, and a plate with a slice of ham, and an eye at its centre. It is difficult to think of surrealism's visuality without thinking of the work of Magritte, and both Magritte and Carrington share an interest in the domestic. Like Carrington, Magritte painted in his kitchen, and chose as his subject things domestic as well as otherworldly. Yet, in the reception of Magritte's work, the domestic is described as 'banal, even drab' (Magritte 2017). In Carrington's artwork, however, she explored the 'magic within women's domestic life' (Carrington 2011). It is perhaps *The Hearing Trumpet* and Carrington's greatest contribution to surrealism that she makes magical the antithetical juxtaposition of the modern and the traditional in the everyday.

In *The Hearing Trumpet* Carrington writes 'houses are really bodies' (HT 13), and compares the aged body of Marian to the figure of Venus, reconfiguring the elderly body from 'a drooling sack of decomposing flesh' (HT 10) to a desirable aesthetic space. In the female subjects which proliferate in Carrington's artwork, it can be difficult to attribute an age to them, and they have much in common with the fantastical creatures of *The Hearing Trumpet*. Carrington's female bodies are often made up of non-human parts. In *Darvault* (1950) and *And then we saw the daughter of the Minotaur* (1953), both of which depict familial scenes, the human figures, especially the mother figures, are fantastical, otherworldly, if not indeed alien. In *The House opposite* (1945), the women inhabitants have animal shadows, or tree-like heads, recalling and arguably reclaiming terms like witch, sorceress, or even crone. Carrington continued to paint into her eighties, and her interest in the elderly, and elderly women, continued as she too aged. In the painting *Kron flower* (1987), for example, Carrington deliberately engages the figure of the older woman. As in *The Hearing Trumpet*,

Mexico (City) appears to be the setting, given the architecture, the women's dress, and the cracks in the pavement, a reference to the earthquake which took place in Mexico City in 1985, two years before the painting was made (Moorhead 2017: 241). To the centre-left of the painting, under a bare tree stand three wizened old women, possibly widows, studying a red flower which has grown up through the cracks in the pavement. A visual play on the image of beauty represented by the flower surrounded by old age and wrinkles, the viewer is drawn in to contemplating its significance alongside the ageing observers. To the right of the group of three women, walks a fourth woman, smoking, wearing a red hat and a coat which looks like it features the pelt of a cat, and may indeed be made from cat hair. In *The Hearing Trumpet* Marian hopes to wear a cat hair jumper one day, and is saving the fur for Carmella, her friend, to knit (HT 7-8). A large shadow of a cat appears in the front right of the picture, as if the viewer of the painting is a cat. Ghostly faces and bodies, which also appear to be female, hide behind curtains or run upstairs in the background. To the very right of the picture sits a figure draped in a cloth. The painting is dreamlike and surrealist in its combination of the unexpected in the quotidian. At first glance, Carrington has painted the 'dailyness' of a street scene (Warner 1991: 13), but as with the other everyday settings in her art and literary work, nothing is quite what it first seems. Here, older women occupy the public space of the street. The shadowy figure inside the house points not only to the contrasting space of the private house, traditionally designated as women's space, but also to a contrasting time, when the boundaries of women's bodies were more closely mapped onto the parameters of the spaces available to them.

In other paintings from the 1980s, created when Carrington was in her mid-late sixties and early seventies, elderly figures reappear. In *Tell the Bees* (1986), *The Magdalens* (1986), and *Ikon* (1988), for example, diminutive, elderly figures appear shrouded in light or dark cloth

which covers their body and head, leaving only the face and feet protruding, and thus obscuring both the gender and most of the defining features of the individual figure. Carrington here appears to be critiquing a view of the elderly which sees them as a homogenous group. In contrast to the above paintings, which are painted in tempera, *Bobbeh/Zaideh* (1987) is painted on a black background in acrylic and is brighter in tone. The title refers to Jewish grandparents, and in Orenstein's reading of the painting, 'Carrington creates a cosmic encounter between the now-aged Patriarch and the Crone. The Crone, a shriveled, wizened flying woman, comes face to face with the grandfather, patriarch, as she soars out of the heavens like a Balinese flying Goddess figure' (Orenstein 1990: 70). The grandfather is seated holding out his hand to greet the grandmother, who proffers hers. The grandmother is smiling and painted brightly with a red face and torso, wearing what appears to be a feather cape. The grandfather is sketched out in white against the black background, and his head, hands and feet are drawn in a deathly pale blue. Behind the grandparents are the curves and hemispheres of presumably other planets, around which are scattered astral bodies and stars that twinkle. Echoing *The Hearing Trumpet*, it is the sprightly grandmother, soaring above the planets, who defies the sedentary decline of old age remarked upon by Buñuel at the start of this article, and represented in the painting by the seated grandfather.

There is also great humour in Carrington's art and literary work, humour which centres on the elderly, and which Carrington uses to critique preconceptions of old age. In *The Hearing Trumpet*, Carmella cautions that 'one can never trust people under seventy and over seven' (HT 7), and Marian states that she has no need of teeth, as 'I don't have to bite anybody' (HT 1). Susan Rubin Suleiman (1990) suggests that humour, and its role in playfulness, is constitutive of subjecthood, and that this is the defining feature of Marian in *The Hearing Trumpet*:

The first thing that strikes a reader of this novel is the heroine's voice; in particular, the contradiction between the humorous intelligence of the subject to whom this voice belongs, and the absolute denial of intelligence – indeed, of subjecthood – to which her age, her physical state, and her dependent status reduce her in the eyes of her family. Only by having the old “senile” crone tell her own story is this contradictory effect achieved: Marian's sharp wit counteracts her “decomposing flesh,” and her dependent status is belied by her narrative mastery: “All this is a digression and I do not wish anyone to think my mind wanders far, it wanders but never further than I want” (3). (Suleiman 1990: 169-70)

Indeed, as *The Hearing Trumpet* progresses, we see the movement from dependence to independence, and from decomposition to rebirth. As well as underlining the reconstruction of the self in old age that *The Hearing Trumpet* stages to dramatic alchemical effect, humour in *The Hearing Trumpet* also works against the loss of visibility which comes with old age. As Marian states, ‘If I ever appear there [the front regions of the residence] now it is always rather in the nature of a spectre’ (*HT* 3). Carrington exploits this invisibility of old age through the introduction of the hearing trumpet, which allows Marian to listen in to her family's conversations about her without being seen. The later revelation of fellow inmate ‘Maude’ as a cross-dressing Arthur Somers is also done to comic effect: ‘A moment later Anna Wertz was clutching my arm convulsively, and we both almost fell through the skylight onto the incredible sight below. Maude's stark naked corpse was that of a venerable old gentleman’ (*HT* 104). Here, the man masquerading as a woman underlines the ‘massification’ of old age, in which the elderly are seen as an indistinguishable group, and simply in terms of their function as difference. As Maude, Arthur Somers is both old and appears to be a woman,

and so is invisible twice over. Suleiman suggests that humour in *The Hearing Trumpet* allows Carrington to make a more persuasive feminist argument for seeing, and hearing, old women: 'her self-deprecating humor does not undercut the force of Carrington's feminist revision: on the contrary, it makes it even stronger – as if one did not need to be ultrasolemn in order to be taken seriously, in order to be heard' (Suleiman 1992: 191).<sup>6</sup> In *The Hearing Trumpet* the old woman's narratorial voice is distinctive, and is all the louder for its humour.

Carrington also plays with scale in *The Hearing Trumpet* to comic effect. The elderly figures in Carrington's paintings from the 1980s are small in size, which points, I would suggest amusingly, and intentionally, to their old age. And yet, the humour of size and scale is used to deceive, and Carrington disarms her readers and viewers in order to make her points of the function of difference understood. The size of Marian in comparison to the size of the cauldron in which she is reborn, compared to the size of the tower in which the rebirth takes place, all works to enhance the humour of this scene of Marian reconstituting herself as a subject. Although the elderly protagonists of her art and literary work are small, they are neither insignificant nor invisible. In *The Magdalens* (1986) the impotence, also experienced by Marian in *The Hearing Trumpet* in the face of her family's wishes, is overturned by a small white pill which is offered from an elderly figure to a younger one, both presumably female given the title of the painting. The tablet, and the humorous twist in the painting, is the contraceptive pill (Aberth 2004: 126 and Moorhead 2017: 241), perhaps the greatest invention of the twentieth century. As Edward James observes, humour in Carrington's work is 'taken with a pinch of salt, but not tongue in cheek' (James 1991: 44). Humour is an intentional strategy, used to throw light on the experience of old age, and its societal prejudices.



The passing of the contraceptive pill from an older to a younger woman in *The Magdalens* (1986) brings to life the debates on the feminist ‘moment’ (Kristeva 1986: 211) circulating at the time of its creation, especially in Western Europe and the US, where ‘towards the 1990s, new generations of feminists (...) felt the need to examine their relationship with the “historical” figures of 1970s feminism and their inheritance’ (Giorgio and Walters 2007a: 5). The gendered functions of difference highlighted by earlier feminists were now being additionally challenged by the ageing bodies of those feminists, and recent studies have looked at ‘the representations of the aging female body but also, more fundamentally, at the mechanisms used to understand and historicize the body of feminism itself as it ages’ (Bazin and White 2006: iv). Carrington’s reimagining of old age through Marian Leatherby, the protagonist of *The Hearing Trumpet*, seems to preempt these debates. Joanna Moorhead, Carrington’s cousin and author of Carrington’s biography, confirms that Carrington ‘refused to allow herself to be called anything with an ‘ism’ as its ending; but it was hard not to see her as a feminist’ (Moorhead 2017: 262). Moorhead also links this specifically to Carrington’s portrayal of the elderly: ‘Later-life women combine female intuition, lived wisdom and insightful logic: they are perhaps the only human creatures to bring these elements together, which is why Leonora believed they are pivotal in the human story. This is revolutionary feminism, and like all the best revolutionary feminism it is as liberating for men as it is for women’ (Moorhead 2017: 230). If *The Hearing Trumpet* prefigures these feminist debates in its authorship, then it coincides with them at the point of publication. The re-reading and reception of *The Hearing Trumpet* coincides with feminism’s re-reading of itself. It is perhaps for this reason that the ageing female body of Marian and her ability to remain active and creative in old age, to remain relevant like Carrington, the author, attracted so much critical attention.

Critical attempts to chart the ageing body of feminism also made use of the figures of the mother and the grandmother to examine and understand the subsequent generations, or ‘waves’ of feminism. Suleiman (1992) reads the protagonist Marian through the figure of the mother, and Orenstein (1990) analyses the figure of the Mother Goddess and her depiction in the novel. The mother-daughter and grandmother-granddaughter models of heredity have been used by (feminist) critics and practitioners in their (approaches to) artistic practice to assess functions of difference and influence outside of the patriarchal sphere (Anderson; Capancioni; Miller; Williams; in Giorgio and Waters 2007). They have succeeded in providing an alternative model of engagement between women protagonists and depictions of women. However, younger feminists were reluctant to see their older counterparts as second mothers, and early feminists did not want to be dismissed as grandmothers, their contributions made invisible by those of the younger generation. This argument has a central role in Julia Kristeva’s seminal article ‘Le temps des femmes’ (1979), published in English as ‘Women’s Time’ (1986), in which she proposes the concept of a ‘generation’ in order to make sense of these arguments.

When discussing the relations between different feminist movements in and across Europe, Kristeva proposed that “the word ‘generation’ suggests less a chronology than a signifying space;” that is, that different feminist movements do not interrelate in solely linear ways with earlier, older generations influencing later, younger ones, but that they all contribute, back and forth, to an ever-expanding, collective bank of memory and meanings. (Giorgio and Walters 2007a: 5)

This idea of the back and forth, a circulation of ideas, for me, maps on to Carrington’s use of the elderly woman throughout her artistic practice. She becomes a signifying space rather than

part of a linear chronology where Carrington can raise questions and investigate functions of difference. The figure of the old woman also illuminates the reception of Carrington work which has been received in accordance with the developments of (historical) feminism and its demands to make sense of itself as it too matures. In addition to Kristeva's 'generation', alternative ways of understanding feminism and its historical development were also considered by critics: 'Should we think in terms of filiation (inherited family lines, mothers and daughters, for instance), or should we think about affiliation (chosen association, invented genealogies)? (Miller 2007: 23). In Carrington's artistic reimagining of women's time, there is space for both affiliation, as the female friendships and palimpsestic texts of *The Hearing Trumpet* show, and filiation.

Eleven black and white drawings illustrate key scenes from the novel in the English edition. The character of Marian doesn't appear until the third illustration, but from then on until the end of the novel, she is drawn in the same way. Despite the fantastical changes which occur around her and to her, her appearance remains constant, dominated by an elaborate and tall piece of headgear. However, these images are not by Leonora Carrington, but by her second son, Pablo Weisz Carrington. Drawn in 1975 and reproduced in the first English edition of *The Hearing Trumpet* published in 1977 by Routledge and Keegan Paul Ltd, the drawings are reprinted in the most recent 2005 Penguin edition, although Weisz Carrington's work is uncredited. Weisz Carrington's drawings are the representation of his reading of the novel. His reception of his mother's text accompanies the reader, and shapes our understanding of it. Carrington's text and Weisz Carrington's drawings are then in dialogue with us and with each other. The bringing together of mother and son, and author and illustrator, within the book of *The Hearing Trumpet* therefore brings together both the filiative and affiliative dimensions of Carrington's time.

Orenstein suggests this generational aspect of women's time is already embedded within the structure of *The Hearing Trumpet*:

The book *The Hearing Trumpet* is constructed on a Cross, reinterpreted feminist matristically. The abbess who winks from her portrait in Lightsome Hall at Marian turns out to be Rosalinda Alvarez Cruz della Cueva. "A cross is the parting or the joining of Ways..." (Carrington, 1977, p.91). The vertical axis of the cross is the spiral into the past history and past lives of the abbess. The horizontal axis is the story of the women in Lightsome Hall, which takes place in the "present" of the novel. (Orenstein 1990: 183)

Orenstein's reading of the structure of *The Hearing Trumpet* maps onto Kristeva's understanding of the time of women's subjectivity. For Kristeva (1986), women's time is repetitive and cyclical, monumental and eternal or cosmic, which corresponds to Orenstein's vertical axis of the novel. The horizontal axis reflects the time of history, or linear time, in which the present of the novel unfolds. For the generation of critics like Orenstein re-reading *The Hearing Trumpet* from a feminist perspective, *The Hearing Trumpet* brings together these times in one narrative space. This coming together of different times corresponds to Hal Foster's view of a superior work of (contemporary) art which is 'able to constellate not only different registers of experience (aesthetic, cognitive, and critical) but also different orders of temporality', and which 'helps us to actualize those diverse temporalities' (Foster 2015: 140). The 'ever-expanding, collective bank of memory and meanings' which unfolds diachronically and synchronically, telescoping the different spatiotemporal locations represented in the different texts explains the difficulty in classifying *The Hearing Trumpet*. The text is '[an]

unreliable narration in which liminal magical states and Marian's personal confusion coincide', where 'the subversive humour (...) is intricately intertwined with unreliable narration and dependent on as well as productive of textual ambiguity on various levels' (Wallraven 2015: 119). It is the singularity of the narrative and its exploration of ageing which marks *The Hearing Trumpet* as both feminist and avant-garde. In 'Women's Time' Kristeva observed 'avant-garde feminists hope (...) feminism will be able to (...) bring out the singularity of each woman' (Kristeva 1986: 208), reconfirming this statement at the start of the nineties: it is 'the 'singularity of individuals which seems to me to be the only interesting struggle' (Kristeva 1991: 167). Foster declares the 'avant-garde is alive and well today', because 'it does not pretend that it can break absolutely with the old order or found a new one; instead it seeks to trace fractures that already exist within the given order, to pressure them further, even to activate them somehow' (Foster 2015: 4). The explosion of the myths of old age, of women's experience of time, and of women's old age especially which constitutes *The Hearing Trumpet*, exposes the fracture of the universal experience of ageing.

The confusion engendered by an elderly protagonist who is an unreliable narrator, Carrington's subversive use of humour, the intertexts and intermedia which disrupt the spatiotemporal locations of the narrative, all function to create a dream-like status in the reader: 'from the moment I opened it [*The Hearing Trumpet*] and read the first paragraph, so amused, so intrigued, so engulfed in it, that I could not put it down till I had finished it. Daylight broke in my hotel bedroom as I was still chuckling over its final dénouement' (James 1991: 44). It is the dream state, the period between sleeping and waking, to which Marian refers as the start of *The Hearing Trumpet* (HT 23) which was the longed-for state in surrealism. In a review of Max Ernst's show at the Mayor Gallery in June 1937, two months before Carrington leaves England with Ernst for France, Anthony Blunt writes that 'the dream

seems to have lost its vitality; and anyhow are we to be contented with dreams?' (Blunt 1937). For Carrington, it is the representation of dreams, of the otherworldly, and its 'dailiness', especially in old age, that is the goal of artistic practice. Carrington seeks to elude the senility of old age and rejects its contentment. For Carrington as artist, there are still dreams to be had and explored in old age.

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<sup>1</sup> Here Israel's translation provides an extra sentence not present in the Spanish text but which points towards Buñuel's playful attitude to ageing described in the preceding lines.

<sup>2</sup> See McIlvanney in this volume for a discussion of Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse* [*Old Age*].

<sup>3</sup> Leonora Carrington a 100 años, 6 April 2017, Foro de la Biblioteca México en la Ciudadela, Mexico City. The Leonora Carrington Centenary Symposium, 30 June 2017, Edge Hill University, at which a version of this article was presented. Dirty Market's *The Hearing Trumpet*, Theatre Delicatessen, The Old Library, London, 4-29 April 2017.

<sup>4</sup> In-text citations from *The Hearing Trumpet* will be from this edition and will be referenced: (HT x).

<sup>5</sup> In fact, Man Ray, Alexander Calder, and Max Ernst all died in 1976.

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<sup>6</sup> (Suleiman 1992) is largely a reprint of (Suleiman 1990). However, some amendments have been made, and in this case, I prefer ‘feminist revision’ to ‘feminist critique’ in the original.